Emptiness and Dependent Arising

From a buddhist point of view, the root cause of all our problems and difficulties is our misperception of reality. Any unpleasant and unwanted experiences we have can be traced back to this misperception that ascribes to phenomena a mode of existence or characteristic they cannot possibly possess. So there is a disparity between the way phenomena exist in actuality and how we ordinarily perceive them to exist. We suffer because we are unaware of that disparity: we apprehend the opposite of what is actually there.

Our reality, our daily life, are made up of various different phenomena, situations and events. Some of them may be mere fantasies that do not actually exist, but the majority of them are existent functioning things. Although those phenomena exist, whenever we encounter them, they appear to our mind as if they had a characteristic that cannot possibly exist.
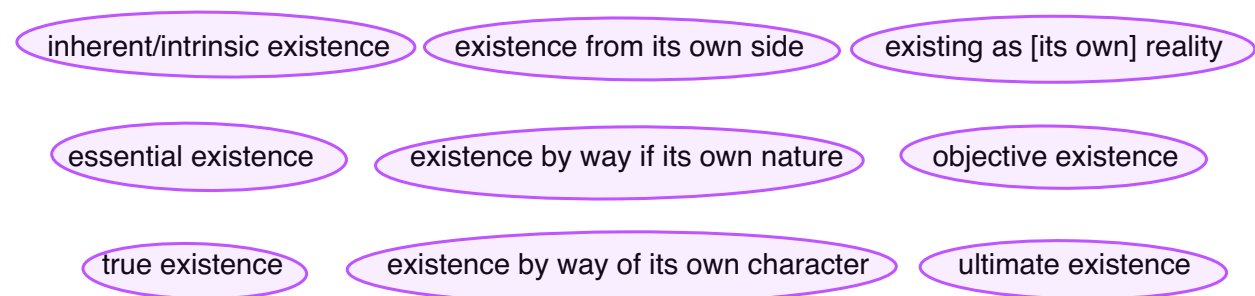
It is important to know that this unrealistic mode of existence appears to all our minds—to all our sense and mental consciousnesses. But not every mind perceives it. The awarenesses that actively apprehend this non-existent characteristic are described as misperceptions or ignorance.

The habitual misperception of reality, especially at the subtlest level, is so deep-rooted and entrenched that we have to dive deeply into the correct description of reality, integrate it in our daily life and experience it at the emotional level.

The *Fundamental Wisdom* addresses the basic question of what reality is and how it can be understood. The ultimate reality of all phenomena is their emptiness which refers to the negation of the aforementioned unrealistic mode of existence.

Object of negation:
In order to gain a correct understanding of reality we need to follow a number of contemplative steps. The first step is to identify the object of negation of emptiness. The object of negation is described with terms such as the following:

inherent/intrinsic existence   existence from its own side   existing as [its own] reality

essential existence   existence by way if its own nature   objective existence

true existence   existence by way of its own character   ultimate existence

These terms basically mean the same thing. Our root ignorance over-solidifies the status of phenomena; it perceives each and every phenomenon as if it had an inherent, true, and self-constituting essence that exists in its own right. Ignorance perceives the 'I', the body, other people, trees, cars, situations, and so forth as existing in a manner beyond their parts, as having their own ontological status, as existing objectively out there, independent of consciousness, and waiting to be revealed.

If something really existed intrinsically, objectively, and so on, then a table, for instance, would be inherent in its parts (its atoms, attributes, functions etc.) and would thus not depend on anything else: it would be findable among its parts as a concrete and substantial entity. However, such a mode of existence is impossible. A table is not inherent in its parts because it has arisen dependently. Anything that exists is interdependent and exists in relation to other phenomena; it depends on its parts and on a conceptual consciousness labelling or designating it. Impermanent phenomena also depend on their causes and conditions; sense objects on the sense consciousnesses perceiving them; consciousnesses on their objects and so forth. Therefore, there is no inherent table or anything else that is findable among its parts.

Of course, in ordinary terms, we say, for instance, that the USA is an independent nation, that we should consider a situation objectively, or that it is in the nature of water to be wet.

But that doesn't literally mean that the USA is not dependent on anything else, for it is dependent on its states, its population and so on. We speak of the USA's independence in relation to the fact that it is governed by the American people and controls its own affairs.
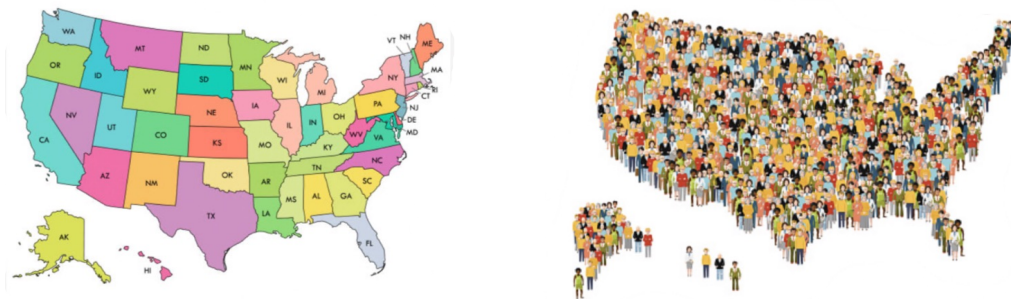
Also, it is impossible to reflect on something objectively since we can only think about it with our mind—which is subjective. Considering something objectively means in general, to regard it without letting afflictive emotions like anger and attachment influence our judgment.

Furthermore, according to common parlance, it is accepted that wetness is the nature of water and thus inherent in water, but heat is not inherent in boiling water. One reason why boiling water is not considered to be naturally or inherently hot is that its temperature depends on factors such as a hot stove that causes the water to boil. However, from a buddhist point of view, wetness does not exist inherently in water either, because it depends on factors such as its causes and conditions, its parts, the sense consciousness that perceives wetness, the conceptual consciousness that labels wetness, and so on.

Heat is not inherent in the boiling water because it depends on the heat of the stove.

Wetness is not inherent in the water because it depends on its causes and conditions, its parts, and so forth.

Ultimate analysis:

Having identified the object of negation, the next step is to investigate whether the object of negation actually exists, whether such a true and objective existence holds up to analysis. Taking the example of the table, we need to analyze whether there is an essentially existent table, a kind of "table-ness" that could be found among the parts, the shape, and color of the table. If it really existed, we should be able to find it.

It is important to understand that here we do not analyze *whether* the table exists but *how* it exists. However, since ordinarily we are unable to differentiate between the table that exists and the inherently existent table that does not exist, it may seem that we are actually analyzing the existence of the table itself.

The buddhist scriptures describe numerous types of reasoning that logically refute the object of negation. If, for instance, a house existed inherently and was able to constitute itself, we would be able to see the house without having to depend on seeing anything that is not the house. However, in actuality, whenever we say that we see a house, we always see something that is not the house but only a component of it. The house consists of a collection of different parts assembled in a particular way. Yet when looking at the house, it is impossible to perceive the totality of those parts because when seeing the front, we do not see the back, and when seeing the outside we do not see the inside. Since the front, the back, the inside, and the outside of the house are not the house, we only perceive something that is not the house. The same applies to other phenomena such as the 'I', the body, other people, trees, and so forth.

Furthermore, if an inherently existent house existed, it would have to be either one/identical with its parts or different from its parts; there is no third possibility.

If the inherently existent house were different from its parts, it would have to be completely separate from its walls, roof, windows, and so forth. In that case, the house would have to be findable after all its parts were removed.

If on the other hand, it were one with its parts, it would have to be utterly and in all ways one with its walls, roof, windows, and so on. Since those parts are a plurality, the house would have to be a plural or since the house is a single entity, the parts of the house would have to be singular.

Some people may argue that the house is identical with the *collection* of the parts, i.e. that the house is all of its parts assembled in a particular way.

However, then it would not make sense to talk of the "door of the house", for instance, since that implies there is something (i.e. the house) that possesses the door and is thus different from it.

Nor would it make sense to say that the house is neglected when only its exterior is rundown, because for the house to be in need of repair, the collection of its parts—that is, all of its parts—would have to be in need of repair, even though the interior had just been renovated.

This type of analysis is called "ultimate analysis" because it searches for a phenomenon's inherent existence but instead finds the phenomenon's deepest level of existence, its emptiness or *lack* of inherent existence. Having thus negated the way phenomena do not exist, we need to posit the way they do exist, for even though phenomena do not exist by way of their own character and from their own side, they nevertheless exists. The way they exists is explained in the context of explaining dependent arising.

Dependent arising:
The Tibetan term for dependent arising, *rten 'brel* (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*), is the abbreviated form of *rten cing 'brel ba 'byung ba.* Since it is not easy to literally translate it, a translation of each word may help to get a better sense of its meaning:

rten = depend/rely,

cing = and

'brel ba = connect/relate/pertain to

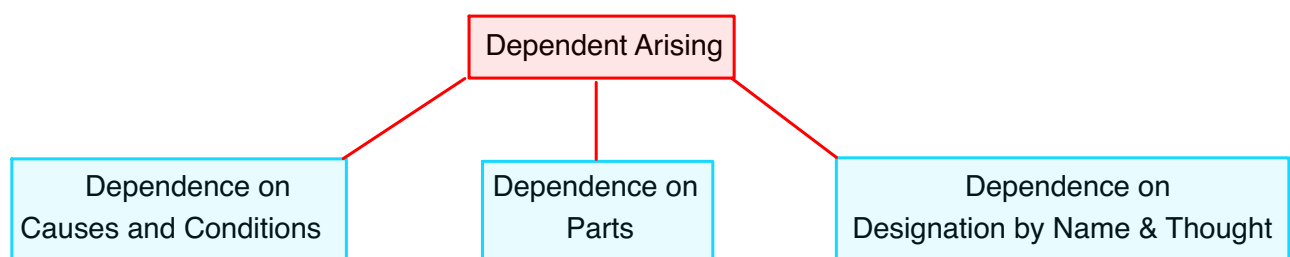'*byung ba* = arise/come forth/occur/originate

So *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba* can be translated as "that which arises [as a phenomenon] that is connected and dependent [on other phenomena]". The more common translation is "dependent arising" or "dependent origination". Phenomena exist because they are *dependent arisings*, i.e. they are connected to and dependent on a myriad of other phenomena.

Taking the example of a flower, there are numerous different phenomena that a flower is connected to and depends on, and which are responsible for the existence of the flower. The phenomena can be classified into three categories:
   (1) Causes and conditions
   (2) Parts
   (3) Designation by name and thought

This means that there are three levels of dependent arising:

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Reflection on the three levels of dependent arising is considered indispensable, to avoid the extreme of nihilism. When subjecting phenomena to ultimate analysis (i.e. when searching for a phenomenon's inherent nature) there is the danger that we may cultivate the wrong idea that, since phenomena cannot be found under such analysis, they do not exist. Contemplating dependent arising helps to overcome such a wrong view and facilitates the realization of how phenomena do exist.

Furthermore, the understanding of dependent arising also promotes the understanding of emptiness while the understanding of emptiness in turn promotes the understanding of dependent arising. In fact, the realization of the subtlest level of dependent arising must be preceded by the realization of emptiness.

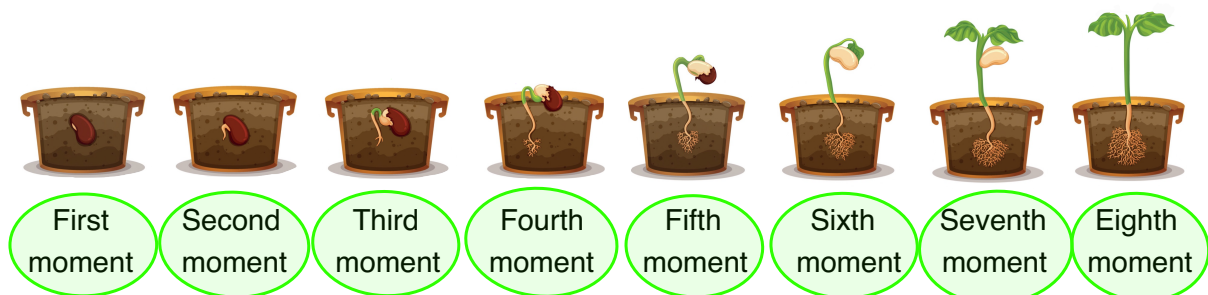**Dependence on causes and conditions**:
This is the coarsest of the three levels of dependent arising because it is easier to understand than the second and third level. It only applies to impermanent phenomena because permanent phenomena are not generated in dependence on causes and conditions.
For instance, a sprout exists because it is a dependently arisen phenomenon that was produced by numerous causes and conditions such as a seed, soil, water, the sun, and so forth.

The understanding of this level of dependence also promotes the understanding of emptiness. If we reflect on this type of dependence, we come to see that owing to the sprout's dependence on causes and conditions, the sprout cannot exist inherently and from its own side, because if something did exist that way it would exist through its own power and therefore be independent of other phenomena.

If the contemplation of the dependence on causes and conditions is taken to a subtler level of ultimate analysis, we also come to see that, despite our sense that there is a truly existent first moment of the sprout, it is impossible to find that moment; it is not possible to determine the very moment when the cause of the sprout ceases and the sprout comes into existence.

One reason is that it is difficult to define a sprout in such a way that it is clear—especially on a subtler level—whether a phenomenon is no longer a seed but a sprout. Another reason is that there is no smallest moment in time, so that no matter how brief a moment is, it can be further divided into even smaller moments.

| First moment | Second moment | Third moment | Fourth moment | Fifth moment | Sixth moment | Seventh moment | Eighth moment |

(Each moment consists of endless smaller moments.)

However, if the sprout existed inherently, objectively, and by way of its own character—the way it appears to us to exist—there would have to be a smallest moment in time and we would be able to pinpoint the exact first moment of the sprout.

Dependence on parts:
This level of dependence is subtler than the previous level. It refers to the fact that all phenomena, whether impermanent or permanent, are dependent on their parts. Taking the example of a car, a car has spatial parts such as its engine, the steering wheel, and the tires, it has temporal parts, such as yesterdays' car, todays' car and tomorrow's car, it has parts that are its attributes, such as the car's impermanence, its existence, and its size, and it performs certain functions that are part of the car. Since it is composed of and dependent on those parts, the car exists.

Reflecting on this level of dependent arising facilitates the comprehension of emptiness, for despite the car existing in dependence on its parts, if we subject the car to ultimate analysis, by searching for some inherent car, a kind of essence or "car-ness" among its parts, we will not be able to find it. In fact, since there is no partless particle or a smallest moment in time, we can mentally take the car apart endlessly without ever finding a car.

Even though we have a sense that there is a car that truly exists in space and time, when we take apart the spatial parts of the car we are unable to find a car that truly occupies space, when we take apart the attributes of the car we are unable to find a car that truly possesses those characteristics, and when we take apart the temporal parts of the car we are unable to find a car that truly occupies time. Regarding the latter, since there is no smallest moment in time we are unable to pinpoint an ultimately existent present moment of the car, for every present moment can again be divided into a former, middling and later moment. Therefore, it is also not possible either to posit an ultimately existent past and future car, for the past and future depend on the present.

Further, on a subatomic level, it is impossible to tell where the car starts and where it ends and which atoms and subatomic particles are part of the car and which ones are not.
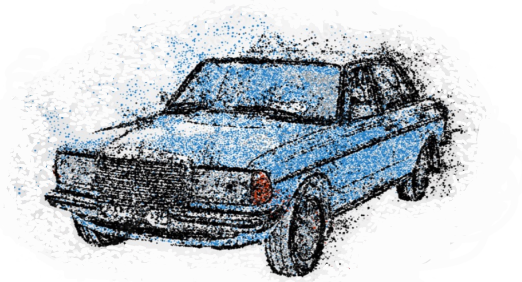
But not only do all phenomena depend on their parts they also exist in relation to other phenomena. A woman, for instance, is a mother in relation to her child, a daughter in relation to her parents, a sister in relation to her sibling, and so forth. In the case of 'long' and 'short', 'hot' and 'cold', 'here' and 'there', 'I' and 'other', the two elements of each pair are connected in such a way that they exist in relation to each other and thus depend on one another.

If however, phenomena existed the way they appear to us, a woman would be a mother or a sister without having a child or a sibling.
Similarly, a pencil could not be long in relation to one phenomenon and short in relation to another or we could not be 'I' from our own perspective and 'other' from the perspective of someone else.

Dependence on designation by name and thought:
Dependence on designation or labelling by name and thought is the deepest level of dependent arising. According to the highest buddhist school of philosophy, the Prasangika Madhyamika system, it is on this level that dependent arising and emptiness really connect. The reason for this is that emptiness describes the way in which a phenomenon does *not exist* whereas dependence on designation takes the same phenomenon from an affirmative perspective, presenting the way in which it *does exist*—on its subtlest level.

Dependence on designation by name and thought refers to the fact that a phenomenon is designated by a term (name) and a conceptual consciousness (thought) in dependence on a basis of designation (the phenomenon's parts).

A flower, for example, exists in dependence on a conceptual consciousness designating "flower" (name) on the basis of a stem, leaves, blossom, etc. that are arranged in a specific way and perform particular functions (basis of designation). The flower exists because a conceptual consciousness labels it "flower" in dependence on its basis of designation, and if it was not labelled a flower, it would not be one.

(In dependence on the appearance of the basis of designation of the flower a labelling consciousness arises that thinks for instance:)


"There's a flower."

Another example is a 100 Dollar bill. Due to a specific quality of paper, engraving, and coloring, the United States Mint labels "100 Dollar" on a piece of paper, thereby giving it a specific value. The 100 Dollar bill does not exist from its own side but in dependence on such designation by name and thought.

"100 Dollar!"

Similarly, the 'I' exists in dependence on a conceptual consciousness designating "I" on the basis of a body, a mental consciousness, and so forth which are karmically connected and perform particular functions or activities. The 'I' exists because a conceptual consciousness labels "I" in dependence on its basis of designation, and other than the merely designated or conventionally existent 'I', no self can be found within the body or mind.

The conceptual consciousness labels "I" every time it thinks of the 'I'. Every time it has the thought "This is me." on the basis of the appearance of body or mind, "I'm sick." on the basis of the body being sick, "I meditate." on the basis of the mind meditating, and so on, a conceptual consciousness designates the 'I'. In the same way, conceptual consciousnesses label all other phenomena. Therefore, every time, we think "something is this or that", we are labelling.

Yet although conceptual labelling is necessary for a phenomenon to exist, it is not by itself a sufficient requirement for existence. Designation by consciousness must occur in relation to an appropriate *basis of designation*. That is why there is a difference between (1) mistakenly labelling "snake" on the basis of a coiled, speckled rope and (2) labelling "snake" on the basis of the aggregates of what is conventionally accepted to be a snake.

(1)

"That's a snake!"

(2)

"That's a snake!"
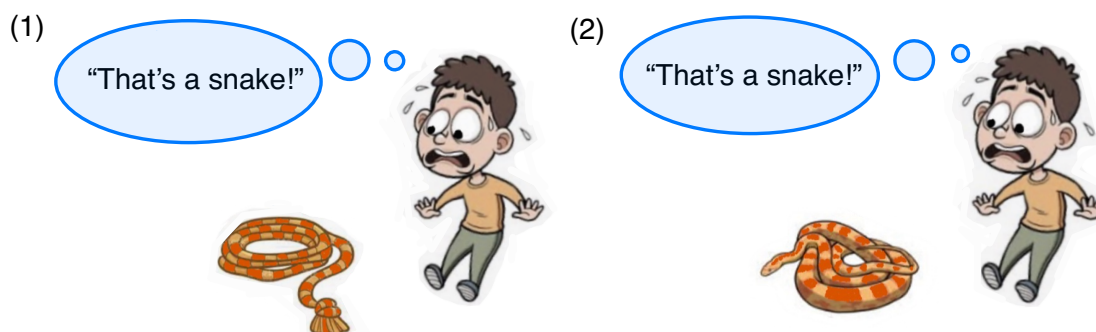
In the first case, the coiled, speckled rope is not the basis of designation of the snake, for it does not perform the function of a snake, whereas in the second case the snake aggregates perform the function of a snake and thus are a suitable basis of designation. Hence, even though anything that exists is merely designated, whatever is merely designated does not necessarily exist, since the snake that is labelled in dependence on the coiled, speckled rope does not exist.

However, both the snake designated on the basis of the rope and the snake designated on the basis of the snake aggregates, are similar in that they cannot be found as existing independently of designation and inherent in the rope or the aggregates. That is why past masters gave the example of labelling a snake on the basis of a coiled, speckled rope in order to illustrate the third level of dependent arising.

Furthermore, conceptual consciousness not only labels things in dependence on their basis of designation it also designates them in relation to and in dependence on other phenomena. For instance, a man is labelled "son" in dependence on his parents, "grandson" in dependence on his grandparents, "brother" in dependence on his sibling, "father" in dependence on his child, and so forth.
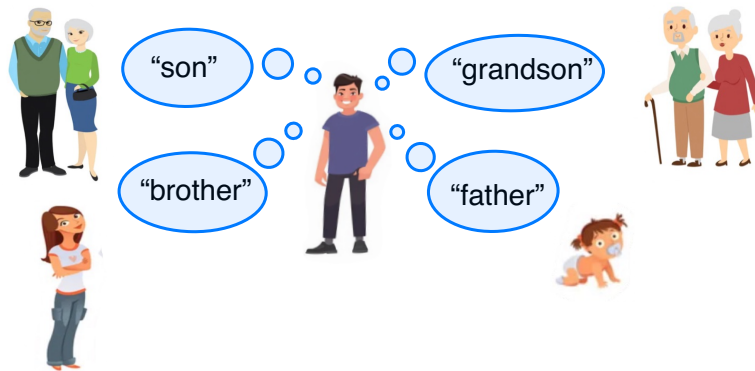
Apart from being labeled a "son", "grandson", "brother", and "father" in relation to his parents, grandparents, sister and daughter respectively, the man is not inherently a son, etc., and no "son-ness", "grandson-ness", and so forth can be found among his mind or body.

Similarly, a pencil for instance, is labelled "long" in dependence on something shorter such as a matchstick and "short" in dependence on something longer such as a ladle.

Being long or short are not to be found from the side of the pencil. Just as the pencil is not inherently a pencil, none of its attributes exist objectively and thus independently of being merely designated by thought.

The same applies to everything else that exists. Phenomena exist conventionally, relatively and in mutual dependence. They exist as being *merely* labelled.

The word "merely" implies that phenomena are designated without existing truly and thus without existing in addition to, from the side of, or inherently within their bases of designation. They exist conventionally since they are labelled in dependence on common conventions.

The moment we start to search, for instance, for an 'I' that can be pinpointed precisely in space and time or that exists separately from its parts and designation, we engage in ultimate analysis and thereby in the search for an inherently and ultimately existent 'I'. Since such an 'I' cannot exist, it cannot be found by ultimate analysis. Even the *merely imputed* (or *mere*) 'I' cannot be found by ultimate analysis, for if it were findable by that type of analysis it would have to exist inherently. Yet, although there is no inherent 'I', it does exist because it exists *conventionally* which is sufficient for it to exist. In fact, it cannot exist any other way.

The same is true for its parts such as the body. The body is also merely labelled on the basis of the body parts and these are designated on the basis of their sub-parts, and so on without any of them being findable when subjected to ultimate analysis.

Therefore, the 'I', the body, the mind, shapes, colors, sounds, smells, tastes, and tangible objects, activities such as walking, talking, writing, and thinking, continuities in time such as weeks, months, years, etc., even emptiness itself—all phenomena are merely designated by name and thought and do not exist in the way they appear to us.